WAR AND FAMILY SOLIDARITY

BY

MARY E. RICHMOND

DIRECTOR CHARITY ORGANIZATION DEPARTMENT
RUSSELL SAGE FOUNDATION

ADDRESS BEFORE THE
DIVISION ON THE FAMILY OF THE
NATIONAL CONFERENCE OF SOCIAL WORK,
MAY 21, 1918

CHARITY ORGANIZATION DEPARTMENT OF THE
RUSSELL SAGE FOUNDATION
130 EAST TWENTY-SECOND STREET
NEW YORK CITY
1918

Copyright, 1918, by the
National Conference of Social Work

392.3
R415w

16 Jl 20 Blackburn

WAR AND FAMILY SOLIDARITY

The topic assigned to me has such wide significance and so many aspects that it is only fair to explain at the very outset within what narrow limits my own share in this discussion will have to be confined. We social workers could learn from History the fateful relations of war to family life if only we were wise enough to adapt her lessons to a world situation which is altogether unprecedented. Statistics could furnish us with valid social data, too, if we were able to thread our way with safety through the maze of variables in which any comparison of statistical data immediately involves the student.

I found myself in such a maze recently over the simple discovery that marriages decreased 29 per cent in New York City during the first year of the Civil War—in 1861, that is, as compared with 1860—and that they *increased* 8 per cent in the same city during 1917 as compared with 1916. How is this marked difference to be accounted for? Obviously here is food for thought, but the more I look at these figures the less sure I am of their meaning. War was declared in April in both years, but here the resemblance ceases. We do happen to know that nothing so promptly depresses the marriage rate as an industrial crisis. There was a panic in 1857 and another smaller one in 1915. Marriages are postponed at such times, so that when prosperity returns there is a marked advance in the marriage rate. The drop in the hard times of 1915 was slight, however,—less than 4 per cent—and many other factors may have to be reckoned with in trying to account for the rise of 1916 over 1915 and of 1917 over both, especially when we realize that the vital statistics of 1861 show a sharper curve in the opposite direction. As between the two periods, a few of the factors that must be taken into account, over and above the prosperity one, are (1) the draft of 1917 (there was no draft in the first year of the Civil War), (2) the promise by our government of family allowances

Sociology 26 Oct 18 Direct 05 Continuation

p 42142

(liberal allowances too, when we compare them with Civil War policies), and (3) the effect of the present European conflict upon migration to this country. Just how far each of these enters in it is too early to say, and it is too early to extend this comparison of vital statistics in the two periods to the country as a whole, for in many states the statistics for 1917 are not yet available. The comparison would have to be limited to certain states in any case, for the reason that many states had no trustworthy vital statistics in the 60's.

I mention this one instance to show how futile it would be at this stage of the war to attempt either summary or forecast. The time for comprehensive summaries is not yet. Of prophecies concerning what war will do to the family we already have a large crop, but then the besetting sin of prophets is to be sure that the thing which they wish to see happen is going to happen.

Why not wait, therefore, and discuss subjects that we know more about? The reason that we do not is obvious enough. Crude as our thinking has to be, we consider war in its relation to family life without delay because we are deeply concerned at the present moment with the welfare of families in which war has wrought changes. I refer, of course, to the families of our men now in service in camp, in the danger zone, and at the front.

We are in no position to dogmatize, but some sort of a day-to-day working theory we have to have, because we are acting daily. There is more than a possibility that this war will influence family life in America profoundly, and we are anxious that all our acts down to the very smallest of them may weigh on the side of family welfare. Indeed, as I interpret the spirit of Red Cross Home Service, in which so many of you are interested, it implies, does it not, a desire—not to explain when too late, but to shape and control, while yet there is time, the forces of this fateful hour in their relation to the American home.

What is happening, and how may we observe and report in order that we may plan and serve? In the earlier experimental stages of the attack upon any new human problem, I know no better witnesses than the social case workers. They have the interest that must precede observation, they have the habit of observing, and they are by no means credulous. Accordingly, following a plan that I have tried before and never without grateful appreciation of the patience of my correspondents, I

have sought, in preparation for my share in this meeting, the aid of a number of experienced social workers, selecting by preference those now actively engaged in the work of the Home Service Sections of the Red Cross. Their evidence, together with that of a few Canadian workers, must be violently foreshortened in this brief presentation, but I shall try to sum it up under the six heads of (1) the unstable husband and father, (2) the unstable wife and mother, (3) the recently married, (4) the unmarried soldier or sailor, (5) the stable and responsible head of a family, (6) what we can do about it.

I am deliberately avoiding the observations and suggestions already recorded in Home Service publications, and I warn you that you will find this attempt to supplement them all too fragmentary. We have only a brief experience to record, but even so I must try to avoid speculation and prophecy by keeping within that experience.

(1) The Unstable Husband and Father

Upon this first sub-topic, the conclusions of my correspondents in the United States and of those in Canada do not agree. Our own social workers are almost unanimous in the opinion that war is doing the unstable head of a family who has enlisted nothing but good. Take, in illustration, such instances as these, of which a good many more have been reported to me:

a. Wife and two children practically deserted two years before the husband joined the army. Now his attitude is entirely changed. He writes regularly, feels financially responsible for their care, is making plans for his family's future welfare, and seems to have an entirely new conception of the meaning and value of a home.

b. A case of estrangement that had gone so far as to lead to a decree of divorce on the ground of abuse and non-support. The soldier now takes a new interest in his three children; the divorced wife evinces marked pride in her former husband.

It should be added, however, that a number of the American reports received dwell upon the improved conditions now assured to families formerly neglected by the head of the house, but that these reports fail to mention any corresponding improvement in the absent man's attitude toward his home. My Canadian informants are of the opinion that the unsatisfactory family man

will, after the war is over, be more unsatisfactory than ever, and their experience of war conditions and influences covers a longer period than ours. Reasons for our hopeful attitude toward this group of what we used to call "married vagabonds" are found in the disciplined and wholesome life of camp, which has so obviously given many men a new self-control and a new physical vigor; the subtler influences of group psychology have also played their part, for the prevailing sentiment of an American regiment, whether in training or in active service, is overwhelmingly a home sentiment. Added to this is the softened feeling of home folks for men who have unexpectedly risen to the occasion. On the other hand, these strengthening influences are going to be offset, probably, by the nerve-racking effects of life under fire and by the effects of prolonged absence. In this latter regard our men are at a great disadvantage, as compared with those of any of our allies except the colonials; they will be unable to see their families every few months when "on leave."

But, either way, should not Home Service take note of the changed conditions in this particular group of families and, in so far as the change is at all favorable—either for the wife and children, the absent man, or for all of them—accept the challenge and make advantageous use of each new opportunity? Our experience is brief, but not so brief but that we have found the new conditions, to an extent at least, controllable. Then why not strive to control them, why not give each handicapped family a new chance of health, of self-discipline, of self-expression, while the army or the navy is giving the absent head of the house his new chance too?

(2) The Unstable Wife and Mother

We all know, of course, that the danger of family disintegration is much greater when the mother, rather than the father, is the weak member. Where both have shown marked weaknesses there is always a chance that the wife will be able to do better away from her husband than with him. There are instances now of women whose husbands are away, who are better able to keep sober and better able to do their duty by their children than was the case before the war. My informants report, however, a number of families in which the direct opposite has been true—in which the wife and mother was able to carry

her responsibilities with credit when her husband was at home, but went to pieces morally with great suddenness after his departure. These sudden breakdowns do not necessarily imply any deep-seated abnormality. People equal to a certain degree of strain and worry often fail under a heavier demand; even among those of us who pass for normal there are marked differences in this capacity to endure strain. One interesting account comes from Canada of a woman who temporarily went under, abandoning her children and seeking low companions, but who has entirely recovered her sense of moral values and interest in her family. Her recovery was aided by a skillful rallying of better influences and associations. We have to remember, therefore, that these failures are not all of them irretrievable, though it is necessary, of course, to discover to what extent actual mental defect enters into the individual situation.

(3) The Recently Married

A trainer of Home Service volunteers reminds me that not all the hasty and ill-advised marriages of war time can be charged to the war. A good proportion of the contracting parties would have been married "in haste" in any case. The points of view of young wives in some of the Home Service families brought to my attention lead me to wonder whether the danger of absence is not greater for both husband and wife in the first year of marriage than at almost any other time. The new home has no well established habits and traditions. If the woman left behind faces the birth of her first child away from her own people, she may easily become morbid and lose her courage. In fact, in the case of one young wife known to me, who was not away from her people at all but living with her mother, it soon became evident that, with the best intentions in the world, these two women were putting their heads together and blaming every small inconvenience upon the absent husband. This slant of theirs reached such a pitch that, when the baby came, neither one wanted to let the father know of its arrival. Nothing in his past or present conduct seemed to justify their attitude. In all probability, if the young couple had spent their first year of married life in their own home and the wife's nervous depression could have been eased by the knowledge that her husband was there and was sympathetically sharing her troubles, no such

sense of estrangement could have come to her. The Home Service worker of experience may well help to interpret life to a young thing who insists upon looking upon the dark side before her baby comes; taking to some extent, in this service, the place of the wise woman relative who is absent, and counteracting, it may be, the influence of the unwise one who is present.

(4) The Unmarried Soldier or Sailor

History is being made so rapidly in these days that, before the proceedings of this meeting are printed, my first comment under this fourth head may be quite beside the mark, but I cannot help expressing the hope that the day may be hastened when all of our men will be fighting under their own American commands. I urge this, of course, not for military reasons, about which I know nothing, but for social reasons. I am entirely willing to believe that the brave men in the British and French armies are "just as good" as our own boys, but each nation has a different background, each needs a different discipline when it comes to such matters as recreation, social hygiene, the use of alcoholic drinks, and so on. The provisions made with loving care by the American people for the health and recreation of our soldiers are necessarily better adapted to American needs than any other provision, however good, could be.

Many of our unmarried men at the front look forward definitely to marriage, of course, but the alternation in army life of the two extremes of months of dull routine followed by weeks of feverish excitement does not tend to fit men for a quiet life in one place. We have to recognize that a long war will mean not only later marriages but, with many men, an acquired taste for adventure and change which may turn them from home life altogether. A Canadian woman writes, "My brother has spent nearly three years in France. Judging from his restlessness while on leave last winter, I should think any regular, humdrum life impossible for him for a while. He has changed from a quiet boy with considerable power of concentration to one who wished to be 'on the go' every minute, jumping from one thing to another continually. I have observed the same change in many of my friends. Some of this will wear off, of course, but it cannot fail to influence their relations to family life."

Evidence comes from every quarter that the mothers are won-

derful. As one Home Service leader puts it, "In the past a mother's affection for the boy just grown up has often been overshadowed by apprehension, but now all this is changed to affection plus a burning pride." So deep is this affection that we often find it difficult now to get any clear picture of the background of the boy who has given trouble in the past. According to his mother, at least, he has always been good. Then, too, there is the compensation that the boys often become more expressive. One mother said to a visitor, "I know my boy so much better now. When he was at home he was one of the quiet kind whose nose was always in a book, but now he writes to me every day and he tells me everything."

(5) The Stable and Responsible Head of a Family

Social workers engaged in war work are beginning to realize, as never before, the importance of fathers. Edward S. Martin declares that the boys who lacked a father's care during the Civil War and became ne'er-do-wells later on (as many of them did) were as much sacrificed to their country as though they had been killed in battle. We must ask ourselves what were the elements that the absent father especially supplied in the home life, and strive to see that, to some extent at least, these elements are made good.

We are all familiar with the type of efficient person who makes everyone round about him inefficient. It often happens that when the responsible head of a family goes his family have been so dependent upon him as scarcely to know where to turn. There is opportunity here not merely for service, but for stimulation of the power of self-help.

(6) What We Can Do Now

I realize that each one of these topics bristles with aspects upon which I have not even touched. The philosophy of family life is not my theme; I have been hurrying on, rather, to the one aspect of the subject upon which I shall take time to dwell. The outstanding problem of the Home Service worker during the strenuous months immediately ahead is the problem of the psychology of absence under conditions of unusual stress and strain. The text books have no division devoted to this subject—it is practically an unexplored field. No group in the community

has ever had such an opportunity to study the effect of absence upon social relationships as you are going to have in the fulfillment of your daily task. By keeping your eyes and your understanding open you can add not only to the world's sum of comfort and right adjustment, but to its sum of knowledge and experience also.

What are a few of the things now practicable that might have a wholesome effect upon the mental attitudes of the absent and of those who remain behind? I venture to make seven suggestions, some of which may seem to you trivial, but when we are exploring a new road we have to begin where we are.

a. One of the temptations of Home Service is to become so interested in constructive and helpful plans for family betterment that the plans and ideals of the absent head of the family may be forgotten. My first suggestion is that we *continue to consult* the absent husband and father whenever this can be done without giving him undue worry and anxiety over small nagging things from which he can be spared. What are *his* ideas about this cheerful plan which opens a new window of opportunity? What modifications would he suggest? Consultation is no new idea to the social worker, but its close relation to the sense of family responsibility needs to be emphasized anew at a time when so many are discovering the possibilities and the satisfactions of service.

b. A member of the Sanitary Commission during the Civil War declared that the two things that did most to keep the soldiers well were music and *letters from home.* As between the family and its absent member everything should be done to keep all channels of communication wide open, while making that communication as vital as possible. Every Home Service visitor should be sure that letters are going regularly and frequently from the homes she visits, and should strive in tactful ways to be sure that these letters are stimulating rather than depressing. Years ago we learned the lesson in social work that the man sent to the tuberculosis sanatorium often left at the wrong time and came back home no better in health, not because he was indifferent to the measures taken for his cure but because he was intolerably homesick and hungry for home news. In other words, the social worker had neglected, after securing the right medical care, to take the additional step of urging the home folks to keep him thoroughly informed of home news and as cheerful as possible about conditions there.

Then, as now, illiteracy was often a bar. A friend tells me of one Home Service family in which a mother had two sons at the front. She reported to the visitor that she heard regularly

from the older one of the two, but not from the younger. Tom and she had "had words" just before he left home. She was sorry now that they had parted in anger, but the visitor failed to find out in this interview whether the mother had ever written and said that she was sorry. When the Home Service supervisor suggested that this be done, the fact came out that the mother could not write. Here, and in many similar situations, the Home Service worker finds a definite opportunity for usefulness.

As regards the tone of letters, a Home Service leader received some time ago a letter from an officer in France in which he says of his wife's letters, "Clara writes often, and her spirit reaches even over here." In telling this incident my informant added, "I was careful to ask Clara the next time I saw her about her letters. She explained that she was at great pains to keep all fretfulness out of them, but was equally careful to tell just what was happening." A mother, whose immediate family consists of two sons who are now at the front, thought seriously of closing her comfortable home in order to devote an even larger share of her time to war service. The boys protested, however, writing from France, "Whatever you do, Mother, be sure to keep the home together. It steadies us to know that it is there and going on as usual. Be sure to tell us about the dogs and don't forget to let us know when the flowers come up in the garden." Here is surely a strong argument for keeping families together and the home life as near to its normal standard as possible. In a rocking world the home becomes the one fixed center of the soldier's hopes and memories. The homeliest things—the dogs, the flowers, the little daily happenings—are the best things to write about. Unimportant in themselves, they assume vast importance as symbols of the unexpressed and inexpressible.

c. The exigencies of ocean travel under present conditions have barred out *parcels from home.* As conditions change for the better, this embargo will be lifted, let us hope, for nothing carries more definitely the genuine home flavor than a parcel wrapped at home (however badly wrapped), planned at home, and packed with loving care and thought. Then too we may hope that local newspapers will go freely to the man who has not ceased to be a citizen and an active participant, in thought at least, in the affairs of his home community.

d. One colleague of mine suggests that Home Service visitors "work *the camera* for all it is worth." Here is a powerful aid in making absent ones seem present. It has been suggested that not only is it well to take frequent snapshots of all the members of the family in their everyday occupations and surroundings, but that each photograph be carefully labeled and dated on the back.

e. We are arrived at a time in the world's history when much

should be made of festivals. The nation is turning the great national holidays to account as an effective way of giving expression and point to public feeling. Similarly, the *home festivals and anniversaries*, such as birthdays, wedding days, etc., should be emphasized more than ever, should be prepared for in advance, and celebrated at home and in the trenches simultaneously.

f. The development of new interests in common has been definitely aided by the organization of *clubs of wives and mothers* planned on a democratic basis. Exchange of the news from the front which comes through letters helps unquestionably to stimulate correspondence, and the organization of classes in war geography, in current European history, or in international politics multiplies points of contact and increases continuity of interest as between the absent and the wives and young people at home. Unorganized and empty leisure is one of the greatest dangers which assail the stay-at-homes among rich and poor alike. There should be no such thing as *empty* leisure in these strenuous times.

g. Proof is not lacking that there is plenty of courage in our army and navy. As the months of war ahead of us measure a year, or a series of years, the supreme need for courage is going to be in our civilian population. Home Service has found no lack of things to do. Its workers are taking up the new tasks with energy and enthusiasm. In the sheer joy of the doing they must not overlook the need of sharing. In fact, in all their contacts with the wives and mothers, boys and girls, of our soldiers and sailors, let them remember that courage stays and courage grows not by shifting family burdens to those outside the family circle but by the kind of stimulating help which makes home responsibility bearable. In other words, Home Service, like every other form of service which is genuine and social, must be *a partnership affair* in which the families visited and aided are to be helped to find their part and play it gallantly. Family solidarity demands this—that our contacts shall release energy in helpful directions and aid each individual who is a member of a family to do his part in the kind of self-controlled, self-helpful living without which this war cannot be won.

This ends my list of suggestions for direct action in individual families, though it omits many items with which the Home Service Manual and other Home Service publications have already made you familiar.

There is time to no more than mention another part of the social program which falls not so much to the Home Service Sections as to other agencies in the social field, though the sympathy and understanding of Home Service are going to be most

valuable aids to social workers in helping forward these reform measures. Just as the physical and mental examiners of the army and navy have brought to light certain weaknesses in our country's social program on the health side, so the work of draft boards, of the War Risk Insurance Bureau, and of the Red Cross is bringing to light weak spots in the marital and social relations of our people. Not only rational law, but its intelligent administration, will help to strengthen family life where it is now weakest. This is no plea for a standpat attitude toward the institution of the family, but a plea instead for a conservation of those human values which the family at its best can best maintain. Take, for example, the present laws regulating marriage in the different states. It is impossible to examine these with any care without finding gross inconsistencies—inconsistencies not only as between different states, but inconsistencies in the laws of the same state. This is especially true wherever common law marriage is still recognized as valid. We social workers are coming to feel that not only should the marriage laws of this country be studied and revised—revised conservatively, that is, in the light of our daily social experience—but that the detailed administration of these laws and their adaptation to varying human situations should be worked out as carefully as we are now working out the administrative details which affect industry. The clerk who issues licenses interprets the marriage laws. How does he interpret them? How intelligently are marriage records kept? How large a proportion of false statements do they record?

Then again, we have known theoretically that the marriage of the mentally unfit must be prevented, but as a practical measure this reform lags far behind because many American communities have not a single practitioner competent to detect a mental defect or to diagnose it properly. Social workers must create the demand which will increase this supply; they must learn too to increase the supply of competent practitioners in an allied field by creating the demand for prompt diagnosis and treatment of all those controllable nervous and physical conditions which are most dangerous to family life. This side of the family program would emphasize, therefore, not only socialized laws and their socialized enforcement, would try not only to put new vigor into the present attempts to control and segregate the mentally

defective, but would also seek, by studying the human values in real families, to bring about those delicate adjustments which would tend to conserve the rights of the individual. In the supremely important task of family conservation, few processes are more important than those which assure such adjustments. In all these tasks, social work will need either the active coöperation or the sympathetic backing of Home Service.

Last of all, if I have seemed at any point to dwell upon the dangers and difficulties of family life or to strike a minor note, let me assure you in closing that I am well aware also of the great outstanding fact that many, many homes in America—homes saddened by war and by absence—are sound to the core. War is applying to them the test of fire, and they are facing the terrible experience of our day in a spirit of faithfulness, of self-sacrifice which cannot fail to store up for them in the future a faith assured, a treasury of memories destined to enrich family life in America for generations to come. Thus we have the old paradox of the wheat and the tares growing together—a mingled harvest, but a harvest infinitely worth our service and our pains.

A naval officer wrote recently from the cabin of an American destroyer in the war zone to his wife at home, "I must close and get a bit of sleep. It seems as if, when it is all over, all the heaven I want is to be with you and son again perfectly quiet." God grant that that particular heaven—the heaven of a relation carried over unbroken and unspoiled—awaits multitudes of our brave men now fighting in France and on the seas.

UNIVERSITY OF ILLINOIS-URBANA
3 0112 053559693